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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking and writing, a marriage originally made in heaven, is only now beginning to recover from a long and sterile period of estrangement. John Dewey described critical thinking as a complex, transactional, context-based web of activity involving the whole person, an activity which writing both demonstrates and promotes. The estrangement between writing and critical thinking began in the 1940s, when educators tried to quantify and assess critical thinking. Today there is a renaissance of Dewey's holistic approach to critical thinking, with theorists like John McPeck, Chet Meyers, and Anthony Petrosky envisioning it as the basic epistemic of every course. Further, these and other theorists are realizing that writing both demonstrates and fosters critical thinking. The link between writing and critical thinking is fundamental to several influential and rival composition theories: the cognitive approach, the social constructionist approach, and the epistemic approach. Writing becomes a form of learning in and of itself through the epistemic approach, as exemplified by the writing assignments for the difficult, often thorny reading selections found in the anthology "Ways of Reading." Finally, composition teachers are borrowing from the specific vocabulary and methodologies of critical thinking, and often are attributing the success of their pedagogy to its foundations in critical thinking concepts, thus emphasizing a solid reconciliation and a future of joint creativity. (Eighteen references are attached.) (HB)

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WRITING AND CRITICAL THINKING: POINTS OF CONVERGENCE, POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Cincinnati, OH, March 1992

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Critical thinking and writing, a marriage originally made in heaven, is only now recovering from a long and sterile period of estrangement. The degree to which the two parties are soul-mates is best explained by John Dewey, who in the 30's coined the term "critical thinking" and its synonym "reflective thinking."

Exercising a creator's prerogative, he defined his concept as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (9). This was a way of thinking, a disposition which included a willingness to live with uncertainty. He wrote, "One can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of uncertainty" (16). According to Dewey, the reflective thinker had to draw not only on intellectual but also on affective powers, such as open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility--"Note that all three are traits of character, not intellect," Dewey pointed out (33), and then warned, "...with respect to education, no separation can be made between impersonal, abstract principles of logic and moral qualities of character" (34). Dewey saw relationships, like context, as crucial to critical thinking. "Only when relationships are held in view does learning become more than a miscellaneous scrap bag" (185). In short, Dewey described critical thinking as a complex, transactional, context-based web of activity involving the whole person, an activity which writing both demonstrates and promotes.

The 40's saw the development of the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal and a corresponding absorption in quantification and assessment. When educators set out to measure critical thinking, they dissected Dewey's concept into subskills in order to render it quantifiable. And here is where the estrangement between critical thinking and writing began. Proponents of measurement argued that writing was messy, that its evaluation was unquantifiable and subjective. Proponents of writing countered that critical thinking was better demonstrated through writing than through easily quantifiable assessment instruments, no matter how ingeniously designed. Mike Rose points out that the "fundamentally behaviorist model" upon which quantification depends reduces writing to "a behavior that is stripped of its rich cognitive and rhetorical complexity" (341-42).

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Five decades after this serious alienation of affections, however, a reconciliation is being effected, primarily through a renaisssance of Dewey's holistic approach to critical thinking. To a great extent, this shift in sensibility is due to a growing interest in interdisciplinarity: when critical thinking, like writing, becomes everybody's business, then it begins to look like a meta-subject rather than a set of subskills. It is not surprising, then, that holistic definitions of critical thinking come from logicians like John McPeck, educational theorists like Chet Meyers, and composition theorists like Anthony Petrosky.

McPeck explains that critical thinking is both a propensity and a skill; both affective and cognitive (17); both a task and an achievement phase--and that the term does not necessarily imply the successful completion of a task (13). "'Critical' is a function of the <u>way</u> a result is pursued, not the result itself," he states (44). Rather than consisting of a specific series of steps, the "way" is characterized by "seeing the facts in both their most persuasive and their most vulnerable lights," (157), a description similar to Peter Elbow's distinction between "the Doubting Game" and "the Believing Game." McPeck concludes that epistemology rather than logic should be the foundation of a course which addresses critical thinking at a meaningful level (158). In other words, just as one does not write writing, one does not think thoughts, but rather thinks about something in particular.

Although Meyers asserts that teaching critical thinking is everybody's business (5), he does not see critical thinking as a generalizable set of skills; rather, he sees it as the context which should frame every course. Like McPeck, he asserts that the core of critical thinking is the basic epistemic of each discipline (6). Meyers' definition of critical thinking is "the ability to formulate generalizations, entertain new possibilities, and suspend judgement" (28), components of a process rather than the achievement of a specified goal or product.

It is significant that the teaching methods which Meyers recommends to promote critical thinking are those most common in the writing classroom. For instance, he suggests an inductive approach (tantamount to a decentered classroom), because presenting deductive abstractions first (tantamount to a teacher-centered or lecture-based course) robs students of the pleasure of discovery, a pleasure which is a positive prod to critical thinking (30). He states that student interaction, such as that which exists in writing workshops, peer response groups, and other forms of collaborative writing, creates disequilibrium, an uncomfortable state which impels students to seek a resolution by examining new possibilities (31).

Anthony Petrosky, although he calls his article "Critical Thinking, Qu'est-ce Que C'est?" quickly introduces the synonym "reflective thinking" to ephasize that he is not

talking about subskills, but rather about "a speculative or questioning stance towards knowledge and experiences" (3), a stance useful in facing an "ill-structured" problem for which there is no clear solution. This definition implies that the critical thinking stance is integral to disciplines such as literature, which require students to grapple with "ill-structured problems," as well as to mathematics or the sciences, where problems may appear to be more obviously "well-structured."

As holistic definitions of critical thinking become more widely accepted, the estranged partners are finding that because they again have common interests, they now have lots to talk about. Just how much they have to say to each other is dramatically illustrated in the collection, Thinking, Writing, and Reasoning, whose contributors explore thinking-writing connections from the perspectives of informal logic, cognitive psychology, and composition theory.

Critical thinking theorists are coming to recognize that writing both demonstrates and fosters critical thinking. Nickerson et al., in a book devoted to teaching thinking, recommend a close examination of writing pedagogy because "writing is so paradigmatic a case of thinking" (247). They point out that "to teach people to write better is to teach them to think better," and that methods which help students write better should be incorporated into courses aimed at improving their thinking skills (247).

On the other side of the dialogue, the link between writing and thinking is fundamental to several influential and rival composition theories: the cognitive approach, the social constructionist approach, and the epistemic approach.

First, research based on cognitive psychology, represented by the work of Flower and Hayes, portrays writing as a problem-solving process, "a complex cognitive skill" which is "both a strategic action and a thinking problem" (449). If writing is an example of problem solving--a term which Dewey used as yet another synonym for critical thinking--then it follows that applying the general principles of problem solving will yield useful information about how people write.

However, Patricia Bizzell finds this cognitive "inner-directed" approach to writing incomplete, relying as it does on the assumption that there are "invariant, universal structures of human cognition" (227) and that problem-solving is "an unfiltered encounter with the underlying structure of reality" (231). Bizzell proposes that the inner-directed model be enlarged by the outer-directed approaches of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, which make room for context, convention, and other social forces shaping the decisions writers make as they compose (229).

Finally, proponents of epistemic rhetoric claim that language creates knowledge, rather than merely clothing it in words. As Kenneth Dowst explains,

> It is by means of writing that one stands to learn the most, for writing is the form of language-using that is

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slowest, most deliberate, most accessible, most conveniently manipulable, and most permanent (71).

In a similar vein, Janet Emig asserts that writing is a not just a learning tool, but a form of learning, "not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique...." (123).

The most thorough presentation of how the epistemic approach translates into curriculum and pedagogy is the anthology Ways of Reading and its companion-piece of theoretical essays, Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts. The essays in Ways of Reading, rather than modeling the lucid window-pane prose enshrined in most anthologies, are eccentric, thorny, sometimes maddening pieces by authors such as John Berger, Paulo Freire, Clifford Geertz, and Walker Percy. These are works which, as the editors point out, leave lots of work for readers to do (Bartholomae, Ways 9).

The writing assignments arising out of these difficult readings incorporate sequencing and revision, which incrementally build towards complex modes of thinking. As Salvatori points out, the assignments are arranged so that "they map out for the student the opening of a new critical perspective" (43). The final assignment of each writing sequence is recursive and metacognitive, asking students to "look back at, to assess, and to re-see what the process of thinking through, and articulating in writing, these various possibilities has contributed to his/her critical understanding of that particular issue" (Salvatori 45). Clearly, reading and writing like this is valuable practice in undergoing what Dewey refers to as "the trouble of uncertainty."

In addition to grappling with the fundamental issue of writing and thinking, composition teachers are borrowing from the specific vocabulary and methodology of problem solving and critical thinking. Larson, for instance, identifies two components of problem solving as particularly useful to writing teachers: evaluating the consequences of choice, and being aware of options (629). He recommends that, to promote the aims of liberal education, composition teachers use problem solving as an invention heuristic, as an analog for formulating and testing hypotheses, as a method of organizing essays, and as a tool in analyzing literature and evaluating their own work.

Finally, to complete the conversational loop, composition theorists are attributing the success of their pedagogy--the pedagogy which is being adopted by teachers of critical thinking--to its foundation in critical thinking concepts. For instance, Bruffee claims that collaborative writing succeeds because it requires students in groups to exercise judgment, "the part of knowledge that's social: decision making, discrimination, evolution, analysis, synthesis, establishing or recognizing conceptual frames of reference and defining 'fact' within them" (181). The implication here is that critical thinking is a socially acquired capacity.

Herrington and Cadman claim that peer reviewing helps

students produce more effective work precisely because it encourages "active, reciprocal decision-making," rather than the unquestioning acceptance with which students frequently adopt teachers' suggestions. The authors show how the comments of student writers who have received peer reviews reflect "processes of weighing alternatives and then deciding how to act" (184), a pithy description of critical thinking.

An amicable divorce--if indeed this is not an oxymoron--is sometimes dismissed with the explanation, "We just grew in different directions." I do not think it is too optimistic, after looking at all of the ways that writing and critical thinking are growing in the same directions, to predict a solid reconciliation and a future of joint creativity.

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